

## I Play Along with the Charade by moonflowers

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** Fluff, Getting Together, High Schoolers being extra, Idiots in Love, M/M, Mentions of abuse because Neil Hargrove, Misunderstandings, New Year's Eve, Soft Boys

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Billy Hargrove, OCs, Steve Harrington

**Relationships:** Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington

**Status:** Completed

**Published:** 2018-01-04

**Updated:** 2018-01-25

**Packaged:** 2022-04-20 16:30:19

**Rating:** Teen And Up Audiences

**Warnings:** No Archive Warnings Apply

**Chapters:** 3

**Words:** 7,659

**Publisher:** archiveofourown.org

**Summary:**

Billy'd been keeping an even closer eye on Harrington after that night at the Byers' - only natural, right? Thing is, watching and wondering never was enough for Billy.

# 1. Chapter 1

## Author's Note:

So Happy New Year apparently I write Harringrove now. I've putting off posting this for ages, hopefully it isn't awful.

Title and lyrics are from Jessie's Girl by Rick Springfield, because it makes me think of these idiots.

*And she's watching him with those eyes  
And she's loving him with that body, I just know it  
And he's holding her in his arms late, late at night*

---

"I still think he's cute."

"God Janet, you'll go after any guy with a pulse."

"Hey, I turned down Brad at Sarah's party last week, remember?"

"No, I remember you saying you'd blow him."

"Aha! But I didn't."

"Only because he passed out two seconds later Janet, come on."

Billy was sneaking in one last smoke before class, and unfortunately it seemed the two girls parked up next to him had the same idea. Their windows were rolled down despite the cold as they puffed daintily on their shared cigarette, leaving Billy as the unwilling witness to their conversation. He had a whole day of inane bullshit ahead of him at school, he could've done without it first thing in the fucking morning too. He flipped his lighter closed and tried to block out their chatter.

"Whatever. I still say Steve's cute."

Now that caught his attention.

It was only natural, Billy supposed, for his attention to catch and linger on Steve Harrington. He was a sort of unfinished business; a loose end, and despite outward appearances, Billy liked things tidy. He liked to be able to draw a line underneath something and move the fuck on. Problem was, they'd never really settled things between them that night, had they. Most of the school seemed to think they'd had a run in and Billy'd kicked his ass thanks to the number he'd done on Steve's face. Which was fine - it sure as fuck didn't do Billy's rep any harm, and knocked old King Steve a peg or two further down in the process. Thing was, none of them had been there that night at the Byers', and therefore didn't know *shit*.

"He's tall I guess. I like that."

"Oh come on, you're so picky."

"Just because I don't sleep with every guy that smiles at me Janet - "

"And he's really bulked up this last year. I mean, have you *looked* at his arms?" A sigh. "I mean, wow."

"Okay, I can sort of see the appeal there."

"And his eyes..."

"I don't know. I guess I thought he was cute a while back. Y'know, before he started dating Wheeler."

"Oh, yeah. I mean, it was sort of sweet, but she totally ruined him. He barely came to any parties when he was with her."

The two of them then embarked on a list of Nancy Wheeler's apparently numerous flaws, and Billy's attention wandered again. He didn't much care either way about Wheeler, and he had more important shit to worry about.

As far as things with him and Max went, the latter had definitely won this round. He couldn't even say he minded all that much - the kid had balls, she'd fucking earned it. They'd formed an uncertain sort of truce, and things were... okay. Better than before anyway; being at her throat all the time had lost some of its appeal since he'd nearly taken a bat full of nails to the balls. That didn't mean he had to enjoy

apologising to the merry band of weirdos she hung out with though. But fair was fair, she'd won, and so he'd done it. It'd almost been worth it for the expressions on the dopey kids' faces when he'd said he was sorry. Hell, he had to get his kicks somewhere. And after a couple of weeks had gone by, he'd figured out he was mostly okay with it. It was all still bullshit, but just... slightly less so. He'd lost and she'd won, and they knew where they stood. Harrington though. Well, things were definitely still murky on that front.

"And she's so... prissy, and private," the girls' voices rose and intruded on Billy's thoughts again, "if it'd been any other girl, we'd know every dirty detail by now."

"Yeah, but it's not like we've got nothing. I mean, Sharon told everyone about that night she spent at Steve's. And she didn't exactly spare the details."

"Shit, that's right. Three times. Jesus."

"And Tara could barely walk straight the day after she and Steve drove up to the quarry."

Billy's knuckles went unintentionally tight on the steering wheel.

"I kissed him once - do you remember? That game we all played at Craig's. Ugh, see, he was so much more fun before Wheeler."

"Oh my God, I heard Wheeler's mom has a whole bunch of dirty books hidden away somewhere."

"God, really?"

"Yeah. My mom says they don't even have sex anymore, so Mrs Wheeler has like, all this shit for when she needs to get her rocks off."

"Oh my God, do you think the Princess borrows her mom's books?"

"Janet that's fucking gross - "

Billy turned up his radio in an effort to stop listening. He didn't have the stomach for Karen Wheeler's hypothetical filthy library that early in the morning.

Technically, a case could be made in Billy's favour - Harrington'd got in a few good punches, sure, but ultimately, Billy'd knocked him out cold. Though having a syringe full of sedative jabbed into his neck by his little stepsister didn't exactly scream victory either. At the end of the day, both he and Harrington had ended up unconscious on the Byers' floor, and to Billy, that left them in a sort of limbo - neither had won or lost against the other that night, and he couldn't get past it.

"Oh my God, is that Tammy talking to Steve?"

Billy looked over before he could think twice about it, to see some blonde chick he sort of recognised all up in Harrington's face. He looked away.

"She's so flirting with him. See that thing she's doing with her gum? That's totally what she pulled when she was after Matt."

"So? If she wants to go with Steve, let her go with Steve."

"Oh, so when Tammy thinks he's cute it's fine, but when I say it's a problem?"

"I never said that Janet, you just need to cool it, okay. You've dated like four guys this semester."

"You sound like my mom."

"God, she's all over him. I thought she was dating Craig?"

"Nope. He took Judy to his parents' beach house for the weekend so she dumped him."

"Christ."

"Yeah."

"Speaking of Wheeler, here she is."

Billy looked up again to see that the blonde girl had gone, and Nancy Wheeler was in her place at Harrington's side.

"I cant believe they still even talk to each other like that. I mean, they were over for like two minutes before she hooked up with Byers. If I were Steve, I wouldn't want to be within a mile of her."

"That's kinda hard to do when they go to the same high school, Janet. Besides, they still look like they're getting on okay."

They did. They were both smiling, though in Billy's opinion Harrington's smile was a little dimmer, as they walked towards the school. Wheeler's hand was on his arm. They were too far away for him to hear what they were saying, but it looked cosy enough. Billy agreed with Janet - if it was him who'd gotten screwed over like that, he didn't think his pride could take being so damn friendly after.

"Shit they're going in, we're going to be late."

There was a mad scuffle as the two girls rushed to put out the cigarette and straighten themselves out before rushing out of the car.

"Ugh, say what you want - he's got a great ass."

"Keep it in your panties Janet, for God's sake," said the other girl as she touched up her lipstick in the car mirror.

Then they were gone, along with the last of the kids, into the school. Billy stayed a minute longer to snatch the few moments of quiet he'd wanted to begin with. There was just so much *noise*; home, school, everywhere seemed too loud.

He watched as Harrington and Wheeler disappeared through the door, close enough to be knocking elbows. Too close, if everything he knew about it was true, and they were still so freshly split. But he guessed it was a hard habit to break after living in someone's pocket for a long time; spending days and nights all wrapped up in each other, literally and figuratively. Not that he'd fucking know anything about that. Wasn't that a peachy thought though - the prep and his princess, the perfect example of what good boys and girls should be, getting busy while their parents were away for the weekend. The bell rang, he cut off that particular train of thought before it could go any further and got his ass out of the car. He was trying to toe the line with his dad for the moment, and the last fucking thing he needed was it getting back to him that he'd been late to class again.

## **Notes for the Chapter:**

Maybe Steve will actually show up next chapter if you're lucky.

## 2. Chapter 2

### Notes for the Chapter:

Guys most of the fic I post is posh English people this is such a 180 I was not ready.

*I play along with the charade*

*There doesn't seem to be a reason to change,*

*You know I feel so dirty when they start talking cute*

*I wanna tell her that I love her but the point is probably moot.*

---

"So Harrington," Billy sidled up to Steve by his locker, "still not found the right girl to replace the princess, huh?"

"What is it to you, Hargrove?" Steve eyed him warily, clearly not sure where the fuck Billy was headed, but held his ground. He looked tired.

"Just looking out for you," Billy smirked, aware of the tight-knit group of girls watching them from across the corridor, and leaned in closer, "I promised I'd save you some after all."

"Yeah, well thanks," Steve said, still looking at a loss as to what Billy's play was, "but I'm good."

"You can't hang out with a bunch of kids forever Harrington," he said as Steve swung his locker shut, eye fixing briefly on the mole on his neck, "it looks weird."

"I'm really touched by your concern, Hargrove," Steve said, still oddly flat, and the fact that Billy was getting nothing back here was starting to annoy him, "but it's none of your business. I got to get to class."

"Maybe," Billy drawled in a last ditch attempt to get *something* out of him, "the girls here just aren't what you're looking for."

"Fuck of Hargrove," was all he got back for his efforts, but it was said with an almost smile. It threw Billy of that that little quirk of his



mouth, the tiniest hint of laughter on Harrington's face and him being the one to bring it there, gave him almost as much of a rush as taunting him.

Billy snorted and let him pass, giving an exaggerated bow as he did so. Steve rolled his eyes, but made no comment. After he was gone, Billy slumped against the cold metal of the lockers for a moment, trying to settle the spin their short exchange had thrown him into, before he realised the group of girls were still watching him. He snapped himself back into the bad boy they wanted him to be, gave them an obvious look up and down and a wink, not bothering to hang around and wait for their reactions before slipping off down the corridor.

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Their talk, if you could call it that, by the lockers at the start of the week had shifted something, and the two of them actually started talking to each other. If you could call shouting insults to each other across the corridor talking. Which Billy did, seeing as how every comment he threw Harrington's way was met with a smile or an eyeroll or a snort of disbelief, and the jibes he received in return weren't aimed to cause real hurt either. He'd noticed a few people looking at them funny as he stuck out his tongue and Harrington laughed and flipped him off. Fucking let them. If this was more of the old King Steve he'd heard so much about, he wasn't about to give him up for the sake of a few idiots who couldn't mind their business.

"Oh my God, the things I'd do to shove my hands in the back pockets of that boy's jeans..."

"Tell me about it. Where the fuck are my cigarettes?"

Billy looked up. He'd skipped fourth period English in favour of having a smoke under the bleachers - he'd already read the book they were meant to be studying twice - but once again his plans for solitude had been thwarted. A couple girls had stomped their way up the seats, complaining about the cold, and huffing as they sat down to rummage around for their smokes.

"How the hell would I know?"

"Got 'em. Anyway, back to the matter at hand..."

"God, I wish it were."

"It's literally the best ass I've ever seen."

"Y'know what, if I can't have it, I don't wanna talk about it. It hurts too much."

"Yeah." A pause. "Did you see him talking to Steve last period? It looks like they're sort of... friends."

Wait - they were talking about *him*? Fucking hilarious.

"Steve must be getting back into the game, huh."

"I mean, I wouldn't exactly say no to either."

As much as Billy would have loved to hear more, the timing was too perfect to resist. He stepped out from under the slats of the bleachers, and looked up to where the two girls were smoking, mouths dropping open and faces red when they realised he'd been listening in. "That's real sweet of you to say, ladies," he gave them a wink before turning to head to his car, "I'll be sure to pass on the message."

Like hell would he.

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Basketball practice was much the same as ever - Billy didn't go any easier on Harrington, except now, the other boy fought back a little harder. Billy liked it. It felt like he was actually playing again, not just blasting everyone else out of the water.

Harrington was already in the showers when Billy walked in, soaping up his hair and water pouring down his back. Billy let his eyes wander without any real purpose, following the trails of water down his shoulders, ass, legs, to the floor. He had a mole on his hip, too. He must have made a noise, because Harrington turned around, blinking suds out of his eyes, frown easing when he saw who it was.

"Hargrove," he turned back to face the wall and started rinsing away

the soap, "waiting to catch me all alone, huh?"

"Couldn't help myself," Billy felt himself swaggering all the more as he stepped up to the shower head next to him, even though Steve wasn't looking at him. His eyes were closed as he rubbed his fingers through his soapy hair. Billy watched the suds come up between his fingers, wash down over his shoulders and chest, before he came back to himself and stepped under the spray. Dangerous Hargrove, too dangerous. Pick your fucking battles.

They didn't speak again until they were all dried off and getting dressed, Billy still shirtless as Harrington teased his hair up how he wanted it. Billy wanted to slap his hands away and mess it up all over again.

"So hey," Harrington said as he studied himself in the mirror, getting the last few strands to lay just right, "you're less of an asshole than you used to be. What gives?"

Billy snorted and reached over to punch his arm, not even hard enough that Harrington had to stop fussing over his hair. And if that wasn't proof of his statement, nothing was. "Really know how to make a guy feel special, Harrington. You are so full of shit."

"C'mon, I'm serious," Harrington straightened up to look right at him, lip still ticked up in a half smile, but eyes wide and sincere. He genuinely wanted to know, and Billy found himself laying it out before he could check himself.

"I promised Max I'd make it right." There was more to it than that, a hell of a lot more that he wasn't ready to speak about yet, but it was enough for Harrington - for Steve - to soften even further, to look at Billy with something like respect, and it threw him totally off balance. "But who knows, it might not suit me," he grinned, and shoulder-checked Harrington a bit harder than necessary on his way out.

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Max said goodbye, pausing just long enough to offer him a hesitant smile before she rushed off towards the school. He hadn't minded

dropping her at the Snow Ball. For all that he'd given her a hard time, sighed and complained and claimed to have a thousand better things to be doing, he really didn't. Or rather, none of the usual shit seemed to be able to hold his attention. He'd been through spells like it before - girls, guys, drink, music, his car, none of it was enough - and probably would again. Not in any particular hurry, he decided to brave the cold and have a smoke or two before driving home again. And it was worth it, for the fearful looks the kids arriving shot him, and the occasional appreciative glances from their mothers.

He was about to head off home for an evening of staring at his bedroom ceiling when he saw Steve pull up, that kid he was always driving someplace hopping out of the car and into the school. Driven partly by boredom, and partly because Steve was a sore spot he just couldn't leave the fuck alone, he walked over to the driver's side window. Steve didn't notice him approach, facing the other way and attention fixed on something inside the building. Billy ducked down to his level to peer through the window along his line of sight, to be treated to the sight of nothing more miraculous than Wheeler dishing out punch to the line of waiting kids. Seemed to be enough to keep Steve occupied though.

"Hey, King Steve," he said, smirking at how far it made Steve jump out of his seat.

"Jesus!" he hissed, affronted as a cat sprayed with a garden hose, glaring up at where Billy leant against the car.

"Stop beating yourself up about it."

"What?"

Billy nodded towards Wheeler. "It sucks, I get it." He didn't, not really. He'd never even gotten close. "But come on, you can't mope forever. She's over it, so should you be, it's fucking sad."

"What?" Steve said again, "what the hell makes you think you can - "

"Come have a smoke with me, Harrington," Billy cut him off, "God knows we got nothing else to do." He didn't wait for Steve to answer, just stalked off to wait by his car, looking up at the cold, black sky.

Steve parked up next to him, still frowning like he expected some kind of trick, shrugging his shoulders up against the cold as he shut his car door. He declined Billy's offer of a smoke though.

"My dad's always smoked a lot," he said by way of an explanation, "I just don't like it."

"Suit yourself," Billy took an extra long drag and exhaled the smoke slowly, just for the look on Steve's face.

"Asshole," he said as he waved away the smoke.

"Never claimed to be otherwise."

"What did you call me over here for anyway," Steve said, and Billy wondered whether he'd noticed he was inching closer as they spoke, subconsciously seeking warmth, "'cause if it was just to blow smoke in my face and tell me to get the fuck over Nancy, it'll be a waste of both our time."

"I gotta have a reason?" he said, raising his eyebrows in overdone innocence, "I can't hang with my buddy Steve just because I want to?"

"So I'm your buddy now?" He might have gone on the defensive at that, if it weren't for the sceptical smile, the good humour in his voice. Fucking good guy Stevie boy.

"I spend more time talking shit with you than anyone else," Billy said, unable to stop his eyes flicking briefly to the floor in discomfort at that admission, before he pulled himself the fuck together again, "so I guess so."

"...Alright."

"But yeah, it was mostly just to tell you to get the fuck over Wheeler."

Steve rolled his eyes and pushed away from where he was leaning against the car. "Just when I fucking think - "

"I'm serious!" Billy cut across him. "You gotta draw a line under it." It was the best advice he could give; it had always worked for him in the past. Except for where Steve was concerned, apparently. "Even if

it means not seeing the bitch for a while, just fucking suck it up, man. Whatever it takes to get through to the other side."

"Don't - " Steve was visibly agitated, little divot of a frown forming between his eyes as he shoved his hands deeper into his pockets, "don't call her that. And I know what I've got to do, alright, it's just not that easy. I still can't - " he paused, pushed his hair back from his face, and sighed in defeat. "I fall hard, okay. Laugh it up, Hargrove." He looked to Billy, jaw tight and shoulders tense as if he expected Billy to either laugh in his face or hit it. A couple of weeks ago, he would have done.

"Nah," he said, let smoke drift from the side of his mouth, "it's not all that funny."

He tilted his head to look at Steve properly, made shorter by the way he was slumped against Billy's car. Steve was still watching him too, frown smoothed away and mouth slack in surprise at Billy's unexpectedly not dickish reply. He'd shuffled close enough that Billy could feel the heat off of him, even through his jacket. The lights in the school parking lot lit up the side of his face and made his eyes all big, and they were a little watery too, and he must have been close to tears *fuck*. But then Billy felt all full of tremors too, like he might fall apart if he didn't grab on to Steve and keep himself whole, and he swallowed and blinked but it didn't go away, and -

"Crap!"

"Mandy! Don't cuss."

There was a slam of a car door and a shriek of laughter, and Steve jumped more than Billy thought was warranted, but hey, he was feeling pretty thrown off too, so he wasn't about to judge.

They didn't say much more after that, or nothing important anyway; crap about cars and music and school. Billy couldn't really remember afterwards. But what he could remember was the way Steve looked every time Billy made him laugh - like he hadn't been expecting it - the way he'd shifted closer again so their shoulders were pressed together, breath hot on Billy's cheek when he spoke. They just stood in the cold and waited for the kids, Billy smoking and Steve

forgetting to be annoyed with him for it, and Billy felt better than he had in months.

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As a rule, Billy liked math class. It was one of the few things he could actually envision being some kind of use after school, and there was a logic to it - right or wrong, no grey area. And though he'd never fucking say it out loud, he was pissed he'd had to skip it. Towards the end of lunch, the busted lip his dad had given him the night before had split open again, and wouldn't stop fucking bleeding. As much as he didn't really want to skip math, he sure as shit wasn't going to sit there dripping blood all over the desk while the rest of the class - teacher included - shot him part curious, part fearful looks while he was trying to get on with the fucking work. Which was why, fifteen minutes into the period, he was still in the bathroom. His lip had just about stopped bleeding, though it was still all swollen up and sticky with half dry blood. He hadn't quite found the energy to clean it up properly yet. Several more long, silent minutes stretched out as he stared at it in the bathroom mirror in a sort of daze, before he eventually reached to turn on the tap.

The door banged open behind him and he straightened up, water dripping down his chin, ready to scare off whoever had stumbled into his pity party. Only he didn't get that far, because it was Steve. Thrown off by his sudden presence, Billy wasn't sure whether to turn on the charm and laugh it off, or to shout at him until he got the fuck out. But Steve's appearance was so unexpected that he froze up and did neither, simply stared at his reflection behind him in the mirror. It was Steve who moved first, coming to stand at his side, hovering like he wanted to help but didn't dare. Good.

"The fuck, Hargrove?"

"None of your business Harrington," Billy drawled out on a sigh, determined to put him off before it turned into a *thing*. He should have known Harrington wouldn't drop it.

"But who - "

"I said, none of your fucking business," he snapped, turning his head

sharply to glare at him.

"Alright," Steve raised his hands in defeat, eye dropping to Billy's busted lip, the water still dripping down his neck, "Jesus."

Despite his insistence that Steve drop the subject, Billy found himself unable to, Steve's concern for him getting under his skin and irritating him enough to make him want push his buttons right back. "Why do you care anyway?" Way to play it cool, Hargrove.

"We're... friends, right?" Steve said, and Billy snorted. "You said so yourself. So I'm pretty sure it is my fucking business, and you should let me care about you Billy, for fuck's sake."

Billy dropped his head and laughed without humour, wiping the water from his chin and flicking it at the white tile. "You don't know how fucking hard this is, do you?"

"How hard what is?" Steve narrowed his eyes in confusion. "If you mean trying to be your friend, then yeah I do, because you don't exactly make it easy - "

Billy snapped then, because honestly, how fucking dense was this boy? Lucky he was pretty. He threw an arm around Steve's shoulders to grab him by the scruff of the neck, and hauled him in to press a hard, close-lipped kiss to his mouth. Before he even had the time to worry over Steve not kissing him back, he did; soft lips parting to let Billy in, his tongue hesitantly brushing Billy's lower lip. He pressed harder and Steve pushed right back, hands gripped in the backs of each other's jackets and kisses wet and messy and tasting of soda from lunch. It shouldn't have surprised him really, that Steve-shows-every-single-fucking-emotion-on-his-face-Harrington went full fucking tilt when it came to sucking face. The bathroom counter was digging into the small of his back, fingers crawling up the back of Steve's neck to slide into his hair, and Steve made a noise in the back of his throat, a low moan that Billy felt through his lips. He could have held Steve like that forever.

Except he couldn't, could he. He'd fuck it up, or something else would come along and lead to him fucking it up, eventually. Billy didn't get scared, not really - after years under the same roof as his dad, fear



had given way to a constant sort of numbness, in readiness for the next blow. But with Steve he was scared; scared because he actually made him feel something *good*, when they shared a smirk across a classroom, checked shoulders on the basketball court, and now with his god damn tongue in his mouth... He'd never let a guy get so close to him before, for any number of reasons. And now he had, it came with the harsh realisation that this one deserved so much better than the absolute fucking disaster that was Billy Hargrove.

Billy pushed him away, a hard shove to the chest that made Steve stumble backwards. *Plant* your feet. He watched Billy in confusion, pretty lips parted and breath short, a smear of blood from Billy's busted lip on his chin, and it was almost enough to make Billy reach out and pull him back in, laugh it off and kiss him again. But it was better for both of them if he didn't. He felt his face harden, pull back into the sneer he wore all too easily to cover up everything else. His lip stung.

"Don't ever fucking do that again."

He waited for Steve to get mad, lash out at him for the injustice of it all - Billy knew he would. Truthfully, he almost wanted Steve to throw a punch or two, that might have felt more normal than whatever the fuck this was. For a second, it looked like he was going to; Steve's face drawing tight with hurt. But it was gone again just as quick, leaving him looking nothing but utterly defeated.

"You know what, fuck you, Hargrove."

Then he was gone, bathroom door swinging behind him, and Billy was left avoiding the eye of his own reflection.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

This is a rehash of like fifty other fics but I don't even care, I'm having fun.

### 3. Chapter 3

*And I'm looking in the mirror all the time  
Wondering what she don't see in me.  
I've been funny, I've been cool with the lines  
Ain't that the way love's supposed to be?*

---

He hadn't seen Steve since school let out for the Christmas break. Or he had but only from a distance, when their cars passed each other dropping the kids off at the arcade or one of their parents' houses, and they both looked straight ahead and pretended they hadn't noticed. Whether it was better or worse that way, he didn't let himself dwell on too much. He never thought of himself as an especially cheery person at the best of times, but those few weeks were a whole new level of suck. He - damn it - he missed their teasing over lunch, elbows in each other's ribs at basketball practice, the way Steve tried to look annoyed when Billy smoked before school, the two of them leaning on Steve's car. He kept telling himself over and over - when he was staring at his bedroom ceiling, or the road stretching out in front of him as he drove, afraid to meet his own eyes in the rear view mirror - that it was better to have ended it before it could start. He'd gotten in a lot of practice at minimising the fallout over the years, and he knew when something just wasn't worth the trouble, knew when to cut his losses and run.

Which was why, as he was getting himself ready for a New Year's party he was 90% sure Steve would also be attending, he was wondering what the fuck he was doing. He *had* to go though, not going would feel like losing. He forced himself to look in the mirror. If there was one thing he was good at it was keeping up appearances, which meant looking the way the rest of the school thought he should, doing and saying what they expected so they wouldn't see any of the rest of it. And there was a familiarity to the ritual that calmed him a bit. But he did it all mechanically, without the usual vanity, or anticipation that accompanied his routine before heading out. He spent a long time making sure his hair was just the right amount of ruffled, that his shirt sat just right. He'd probably put on

too much cologne, but if anything that was likely to be in his favour. He felt heavy, like he'd rather just lie the fuck down and try to sleep, but he'd die before letting anyone see that. Sharp and mean, he grinned at his reflection, and hoped it was enough.

The party was as lacklustre as Billy knew it was going to be, and within the first half hour he was bored out of his brains. He passed the time as was expected of him; downing any drink passed his way, putting his hands on any chick who looked half-interested, jeering along with everyone else when a guy from the basket ball team couldn't handle his beer and threw up out the window. When he went to grab another beer, he ran into the usual group of girls chatting shit around the punch bowl, getting louder with each cup of the stuff.

"Billy Hargrove looks delicious tonight."

"Ugh yes. D'you think he came here with someone?"

"Does it matter? If things go how I want, he'll be leaving with me."

"God, you're awful."

"I heard Gina B forgot her panties under the back seat of his car."

"Well, I'll be sure to look for them when I'm in there later."

"And I heard his dick - "

For once, he didn't want to fucking hear it.

He knew Steve was there, had heard a few people call out to him, caught glimpses of him between the kids dancing in the front room. And it fucking sucked; the need to see him and the desperation to avoid him pulling him in two, making him feel prickly and strung tight, making him knock back another three beers without coming up for breath. Each time he turned his back it got a little harder. When he saw him waiting outside the bathroom so he spun on his heel and slipped back downstairs, when he ducked quickly into the kitchen after seeing Steve on the sofa with Wheeler and Byers, smiling that same flat half-smile.

It wasn't long until midnight, but he was seriously considering going the fuck home. He barely felt drunk anymore, just too hot and a bit like he might throw up, but he knew he'd have to stick it out at least long enough to kiss some girl at midnight. If he got through the rest of the night without punching someone's lights out, it'd be a fucking miracle. Maybe it was a good idea - he might've felt less like he wanted to crawl out of his own skin if he could vent some of whatever the fuck he was feeling onto somebody else. Usually worked.

At about five minutes to 1985, the thing Billy had been trying to avoid all night finally happened, and he met Steve's eye across the packed out sitting room. The thin smile on Steve's face vanished instantly, replaced with the same sort of hard, pathetic sadness Billy was uncomfortably aware was written all over his own face too. For once, he couldn't quite be bothered to hide it. No one was looking anyway, drunk as hell and too wrapped up in whatever person they were busy rubbing against. The girl Steve was dancing with looked way more into it than he did in Billy's expert opinion, smiling prettily up him, eyes glazed over as she swayed against him, chattering away and not even noticing his attention was elsewhere. Fucking dumb as it might have been, stupid and sappy and fucking impossible, he wished himself in her place. Wished it was his hands on Steve's shoulders, or on the hot back of his neck like they had been when they'd kissed in the bathroom, sliding over the small of his back, or into the back pocket of his jeans to palm his ass. More than that though, he wished it could be him kissing Steve at midnight, tasting the shitty beer on his tongue, Steve's fingers tangled in his hair to keep him close. Billy wasn't really even dancing anymore, just standing there, letting the chick who'd plastered herself to his side - Tammy? Tanya? - wriggle against him to her heart's content, the smell of her hairspray in his nose. They watched each other, eyes locked over the writhing mass of people between them, and Billy wished he wasn't so much of a fuck-up, that he could at least explain to Steve why it was better, if they didn't - why they just couldn't.

It must have been midnight then, because there was a round of cheers and shouts before a thin arm looped around his neck and lips sticky with too-sweet punch were pressed to his. He allowed it for a moment, mostly because he was too thrown off his game to do much

else, before he broke away and looked up to find Steve again. But he was gone; just a room full of kids still sucking face and throwing drink about, and the need to see him that he'd been fighting against all night won out over the desperation to keep away. He was done being fucking cautious if it felt like this, like shutting himself in a cage while people poked at him through the bars. He nudged the girl still grasping at him towards some other guy, and pushed his way through the crowd in search of Steve.

He'd checked the back yard, kitchen, downstairs bathroom, upstairs bathroom and the master bedroom and was beginning to think he'd fucked off home. But then he found him, in an empty guest room, alone on a balcony overlooking the woods at the back of the house. Fucking rich people; *balconies*, Jesus Christ. It was quiet and dark with the lights switched off, voices of kids spilled out into the garden below despite the cold sounding a million miles away. Billy said nothing when he stepped through the door, which was probably enough by itself to clue Steve in as to who'd found him.

"What do you want?" he sounded tired again, the listless and disconnected voice he'd been starting not to use around Billy anymore, before he'd fucked things up. Billy said nothing, because honestly, what the fuck *did* he want? "You bored with Trisha already?"

"No." He was never into her in the first place.

"Because it seems to me Hargrove," Steve ignored his answer, voice hard and not even bothering to turn and face him, back rigid as he kept staring out at the garden, half concealed behind the floral curtains, "that that's just what you do. You fuck with people. You pick them up and bat 'em around a bit, and drop them again when you're done."

"You're right," he closed the door and stepped further into the room, boots soundless and sinking into the pale, plush carpet.

"And if you think I'm just going to, what, roll over and say that's okay Hargrove, please feel free to kick me on your way out, *again*, then you've got another - what?"

"I said you're right," at least his voice was steady, a small blessing.

Felt like it shouldn't be.

Steve did turn to face him then, side of his face lit up and made sharp by the almost full moon, the part of his lips thrown into shadow, the slant of his eyelashes on his cheek. He was frowning, but Billy thought, *hoped*, it was confusion more than anger. He hesitated, licked his lip. "About what?"

"I play people. I drop 'em." He didn't even bother picking them up most of the time; people like Tommy and Carol and that random girl who'd kissed him at midnight that he let latch onto him for a while, be carried by him, before he eventually pried them off or they fell away by themselves. He didn't like anyone too close. "But I can't drop you, Harrington," he said, going for light-hearted and goddamn crashing and burning. "I don't want to."

"Fucking - can't you just - " Steve huffed, frustrated, and tipped his head back as if praying for patience. It was a look people gave Billy a lot. "Why'd you push me away? You'd had your fun, got me thinking it was - " he cut himself off, swallowed. "I don't have time for your bullshit okay? I got enough other crap to worry about. So tell me what the fuck that was all about or just... leave me alone."

Billy made himself unclench, release his arms from where he'd had them folded, tight and defensive, across his chest. He went over to the balcony and sat down heavily, sliding his legs between the railings to hang over the edge. His eye followed two girls making slow, stumbling progress across the frosty lawn without really seeing them. "Sit down, Harrington."

"Billy, what - "

"Steve, sit the fuck down." There was no bite to his voice anymore, which should have pissed him off, but it was too late for all of that. Steve huffed again, but did as Billy asked and sat down next to him, inches of cold night air left purposely between them. It wasn't until then that Billy noticed the cigarette clamped stiffly between Steve's fingers. "You said you didn't like smoking."

"I don't," Steve said flatly, unembarrassed about being called out. "I used to do it a little, at parties and stuff. Now I only do when I'm -

when I need it." He blew out a stream of smoke, watched it drift up and fade into the night. "Still fucking hate it though." He passed it over to Billy without looking at him. "Start talking."

"I'm a fuck-up, Steve," he said, and took the cigarette. Once, he might have shouted or sneered his way through such a conversation, but frankly he was too fucking tired for anything other than straight talking. "That ain't no secret. Everything I touch goes to shit. And... I don't want you to be a part of that."

"What?"

"Fucking - " did he have to spell it out? "You're too - you deserve more than me and my baggage, Harrington, alright? I'm doing you a favour in the long run, trust me," he held the smoke out to Steve, but he didn't take it. "Go find yourself another pretty little girl, and go live your life." He took a short, hard drag from the cigarette. Jesus, did he need it.

"So you're saying," said Steve, and God, he wasn't making this fucking easy, "what, you think you're not good enough? That's you've decided it's all going to go to shit anyway, so why even bother?" And Billy couldn't help but finally turn to look at him again then; his mouth turned down unhappily as Steve glared at him.

"Yep," he said, tried to smile. "I might be a dick, Harrington, but even I gotta draw the line somewhere. I'm not dragging you down with me."

"So you just get to decide? That doesn't seem fair."

"Life isn't fair, babe," Billy sighed. "Look, I'm trying to help you out here - "

"What if I don't want you to?"

"Steve," Billy was seriously losing the will here, "I've been through enough shit to know - "

"Yeah, well so have I," Steve said hotly, and Billy was dimly worried about someone in the garden overhearing, but even more worried about the fact that the look on Steve's face was breaking down every

argument he had for why he shouldn't do what he was about to, "enough to know that sometimes it's worth hanging on to something. So don't you fucking tell me - "

Billy kissed him. A little bit because he didn't know what else to say to make Steve understand - he always spoke better with actions anyway - and a little bit just because he wanted to. Just as he'd pictured earlier, Steve's mouth tasted like beer, hot and slack with surprise, and the thickness of cigarette smoke on his tongue. The angle was awkward, with the cold space between them. Steve froze up for a second, tense and tight, but then, just as he had in the school bathroom, he softened, parted his lips for him, sucked light and slow on Billy's bottom lip. Billy kept his eyes open, although so close up Steve's face was nothing but a blur, hazy and grey blue in the dark. As he'd known he would, Steve reached up to grip a handful of Billy's hair, holding him there as if worried he'd push him away again. Not fucking likely. Without looking up, Billy flicked the end of the cigarette off the balcony, bringing his hand to smooth over Steve's cheek. *I'm not going anywhere.*

"You're such an asshole," Steve said against his lips when they broke apart to breathe.

"Yeah."

Steve snorted and kissed him again, soft and light and perfect. "If you're trying to convince me not to like you, you're doing a pretty shitty job of it, Hargrove."

"C'mere," Billy stretched out his arm, "it's fucking cold." Steve rolled his eyes but did as Billy asked, and shuffled closer so their thighs pressed together through their jeans, Billy's arm around his shoulder. He turned his head to bury his nose in Steve's hair, quietly thrilled at the weight of his body against his side, warm and solid in the chill of the night, people still partying below them completely unaware.

"I really fucking hope you're right," he said into the top of Steve's head.

"About what?" he felt Steve's voice through his chest.



"That not everything has to go to shit. Because I really don't want this to." It was the first thing in a long while he'd let himself care about enough to feel that way about, never mind admit it. Everything Billy normally let people see was all on the surface; all the anger, the bluster, the flirting and shouting, was all show and no substance. Steve had somehow waved his way passed all that.

"Yeah well, I won't let it." Steve leant more heavily against him and twisted their hands together. They were fucking holding hands on a balcony at some chick's crappy New Year's party, and Billy was ecstatic about it. Fucking tragic.

"Good. Me neither."

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Yeah I know there's been a bunch of New Year fics and I'm a month late on that score, but I just really wanted them looking sadly at each other across a crowded room while everyone else kisses and they can't.

Thanks for reading guys :)